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AUTHOR	Meagher, Eileen M.
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ABSTRACT

Malika Oufkir of Morocco recounts her story in "Stolen Lives." Loung Ung of Cambodia relates her story in "First, They Killed My Father." Susan McDougal of Arkansas, USA, tells her story in the aptly named, "The Woman Who Wouldn't Talk." This paper looks at the struggles of these three very different women from very different cultures, struggles that saw each woman experience the devastating veiling/eclipse of her core self and yet experience a transformation where each woman's soul emerges from the prisons referred to in writings by Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton and where each, as Emily Dickinson says, "selects her own society" and discovers herself a "Divine majority." The paper notes that because of their parental influences, mixed cultural backgrounds, and a habit of asserting themselves among outspoken siblings, all three women had a strong sense of justice, independent spirits, an inalienable sense of personal dignity, and the determination to stand up for principle. It also states that while each woman speaks of hatred as giving her a purpose to survive, each focused on living in the moment and that focus became helping others. The paper explains that each of the three women veiled their inner core and appeared through their admission of hatred to take on the patriarchy in a patriarchal manner. It finds that, however, in the silence, they were drawn even in their hesitation, doubt, and confusion to listen to that core and nurture it. (NKA)

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By Eileen M. Meagher

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Telling Their Stories: Women Construct/Instruct through Survival Rhetoric

4C's, NYC 2003

Eileen M. Meagher

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

In her recent book, *The Birth of Pleasure*, Carol Gilligan discusses the "Love laws" or natural laws instituted by patriarchy, laws that drain pleasure and link it to the denial/death of the core self. She quotes from an early short story by Virginia Woolf, "The entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil, and left the world...." Gilligan then goes on to quote from an early story by Edith Wharton, "I have somehow thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: There is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room where one receives formal visits; the sitting room where the members of the family come and go as they wish; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms the handles of whose doors are never turned; [no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes." In this paper, I want to look at the struggles of three very different women from very different cultures, struggles that saw each woman experience the devastating veiling/eclipse of her core self and yet experience a transformation where each woman's soul emerges from the prisons referred to by Woolf and Wharton and where each as Emily Dickinson says "selects her own society" - and discovers herself a "Divine majority."

The three women are Malika Oufkir of Morocco, who recounts her story in *Stolen Lives,* Loung Ung of Cambodia who tells her story in *First, They Killed My Father,* and Susan McDougal of Arkansas, USA whose story is aptly named, *The Woman Who wouldn't Talk.*

Malika Oufkir, the eldest daughter of General Oufkir who was a trusted lieutenant of the King of Morocco, and of a French born Muslim mother raised by French nuns was at the age of five adopted by the King of Morocco to be a companion to his own small

daughter. Malika worshipped her parents, especially her mother and hated being torn from her. She describes herself at the palace as "a tormented soul. Outwardly, I was smiling, happy, funny and mischievous, but all it took was a word, or a whiff of perfume that reminded me of my mother, and I would clam up." She attempted suicide twice. She was raised by the king and grew to love him as a second father but her love was ambivalent. She chafed under the restrictions and humiliations of living in the closed community of king and concubines. She understood and didn't understand why her parents did not try to get her back. She soon came to realize that she had no family: her own family wasn't hers and at the palace she was constantly reminded that she was not a true part of that family either.

She writes of that time that she was used to being shut up, to living in a confined space, to occupying her time and to falling back on her own resources. She was alone in the world. When she was eighteen, she beseeched the king to allow her to return home; with reluctance, he did. A year later, her father led a revolt against the king; he was subsequently murdered and she and her mother and her siblings were imprisoned for the next twenty years in various places all over the Moroccan desert, living under the most deprived conditions. She engineered an escape by scraping a tunnel under her cell with a spoon and the edge of a tuna can. After twenty years of inhumane conditions, she found her way to Paris where she is now living and where she wrote her book. She credits her hatred of the king and of Moroccan society with her ability to survive.

Loung Ung was born in Phnom Penh to a well to do family - the fifth of six children. Her father who was part Cambodian and part Chinese worked for the government. Her mother was Chinese. Loung was a headstrong, independent child who worshipped her parents but it was her father who acknowledged her resourcefulness. She says of him, "Pa always defends me --to everybody. He often says that people just don't understand how cleverness works in a child and that all these troublesome things I do are actually signs of strength and intelligence. Whether or not, Pa is right, I believe him. I believe everything Pa tells me." When she was five years old, the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia and began the systematic slaying of all former government workers. Loung

and her family fled Phnom Penh along with thousands of others only to labor under the Khmer Rouge in a so called farming commune where work was interminable, food was scarce, and families did not talk to each other for fear of betraying the secret that they were in some way connected to the former government.

An older sister was taken to a camp where she died. Shortly thereafter, Loung's father was taken away and killed. The two older boys were already in camps. Loung was now six years old, her sister was nine and her remaining brother was eleven. Their baby sister was four. Loung's mother told the three older children that they must leave her and go in three separate directions because only in that way could they survive. The children did as they were told and ended up in three different camps. The labor was intense, the food was horrible and insufficient, and the camp leaders were of course cruel. Loung kept to herself; she had long since learned that she could not trust anyone. She later learned that her mother and baby sister were killed.

After several years in the camp, she accidentally saw her family in a hospital where she had to go to recover from the illness that claimed her older sister. While she was there, the hospital was bombed by attacking Vietnamese who were liberating the country from the Khmer Rouge. She and her family escaped and began the long and dangerous trek back to Phnom Penh. Eventually she escaped from Cambodia and entered the US with her older brother who with his wife raised her. She says that it was her hatred of the Khmer Rouge that sustained her.

Susan McDougal of Whitewater fame was imprisoned because she refused to testify before a grand jury commissioned by Kenneth Starr, the Independent Counsel appointed to investigate the Whitewater affair. She was born of a Belgian mother and an Arkansas father, Jim Henley - a marine sergeant -, who served in WWII. Her mother was drawn ambivalently into the marriage because of a snow job done on her by Henley, a pattern that Susan would repeat in her decision to marry Jim McDougal. Susan was the middle child of seven children. She was an avid reader, not of the usual books kids read but of

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biographies like that of Madame Curie and of historical works such as *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. As a fifth grader she became immersed in the writings of Karl Marx.

The Henley family dynamic was boisterous, loud, talkative and presided over by the "marine like" father. Susan learned the art of short, swift, and sometimes cutting repartee. It was her mother, a medical student in Belgium when she met Jim Henley, who insisted that the family be colorblind. Despite the objections of the neighbors, she welcomed African Americans to her home. Susan attended Ouachita Baptist College in Arkansas where she decided to major in Latin. Instead she met a visiting professor there named Jim McDougal, seventeen years older than she, and after serious courting from him, she reluctantly married him. She helped McDougal with his real estate purchases but became aware that she wasn't being told everything. The marriage deteriorated. She realized that he was manic-depressive. She divorced him. Three years later Kenneth Starr subpoenaed her to testify before a grand jury about the Whitewater affair. She shortly realized that all he wanted from her was "something on the Clintons." She says that she was pressed to even admit an affair with Bill Clinton. She refused to testify because she believed that Starr did not want to hear the truth,

Because of her refusal to talk, she was sent to prison. Her book is largely about her time in seven different prisons, and what she and fellow prisoners did to maintain their sanity. At one time, she was placed in a fiberglass cylinder where she was watched 24-hrs day. At this point, she begged her fiancée to get her to a mental hospital; she felt she was going to break. She says her hatred of Kenneth Starr and what he had unfairly done to her helped her to fight him and thereby endure prison and keep her self-respect.

Because of their parental influences, mixed cultural backgrounds, and a habit of asserting themselves among outspoken siblings, all three women had a strong sense of justice, independent spirits, an inalienable sense of personal dignity, and the determination to stand up for principle. While each asserts that it was hatred that helped them to survive, an examination of each woman's tale reveals each unconsciously nurtured and kept alive "the core self" through telling stories, through resorting to humor,

through keeping silent about family tragedies, and through helping surviving family members - in McDougals' case, that became helping her fellow inmates.

Malika Oufkir told herself stories at night while she was imprisoned in the palace, and during the twenty years in the desert, she constructed a fantasy life for her siblings by creating a story about a family in Russia. Each night, she would add to this story. The family became so immersed in it and its characters that they came to mark prison time by the events in the story. **Loung Ung,** who lost her mother, father, and two sisters to the Khmer Rouge, helped herself survive the tragedy of each successive family member's death by picturing to herself in detail the exact circumstances of the torture and subsequent death and the liberation of the individual spirit which she believed followed. Loung was only five and six years old when these tragedies happened. **Susan McDougal** from her very first night in prison joined wholeheartedly in the storytelling of the women inmates. Each new arrival had to tell her story titled "How I Got Here." She continued to explore a number of those stories with the women who told them.

Humor, a gallows humor, was also a survival technique especially for Malika and Susan but also in a unique way for Loung. **Malika,** her mother and her siblings joked constantly about their guards, the king, and about their own circumstances. They amused themselves by putting on outlandish skits and by having outrageous contests such as farting contests. **Susan McDougal** who was used to marine language at home had no trouble adjusting to gallows humor in prison. **Loung,** on the other hand, sublimated her humor into visualizing how she would punish her captors and the pleasure she would derive from that.

The self-respect with which each was engrained in childhood/family experiences kept each of the women from behaving like animals when conditions became unbearable. Malika relates that the manners she was trained in at home and at the palace and which she insisted that her siblings practice in prison kept them from destroying each other. Their hunger was so bad at times that they could have easily killed one another. Loung Ung tells of watching her fellow captors eat human remains out of hunger and of her

horrible guilt whenever she stole food from others. Susan McDougal credits her marine father with her ability to walk in public with her head held high even when her feet were in chains and her arms in shackles.

While each woman speaks of hatred as giving her a purpose to survive, each focused on living in the moment and that focus became helping others. Malika set up a daily prison schedule of classes. This effort to educate her siblings gave her days a profound purpose and kept her siblings alive mentally and psychologically. Susan spent her time in prison helping other women. Loung was an unbelievably resourceful six-year old who never forgot her mother's love and her father's faith in her. She believed she could do anything. She became an outstanding worker and whenever she saw her sister Chou, she encouraged her to be strong. She was constantly internally mentoring her siblings.

But as I reflect on each woman's account, I believe that it was her inner core, her forcefully veiled and silenced soul that sustained her and ultimately transformed her. In the last chapter of their books, all three eschew hatred. **Malika** evaluates her life in prison: "In prison, my inner life was a thousand times richer than that of the others (people outside of prison), and my thinking a thousand times more intense. I was a lot more aware than people who are free. I learned to reflect on the meaning of life and death." And of hatred she says, "Hatred will never enable me to make up for the lost years." She found the preoccupations of so many of her former friends superficial. She even returned to Morocco to make peace with it. She writes, "The desert soothed me. It reconciled me with my past, and helped me understand that I am just passing through. In the desert, there is no need for pretence, I am truly myself. Nothing matters except the eternal. East and West at last cohabit in peace."

Susan McDougal who had relied so much on others to fill up her soul, writes, "During my time in jail, I honestly evaluated the truth about my life. That process of evaluation and examination is one I would not forfeit for anything in the world. .... I don't know what my future holds but I do know that I will be ready to face it squarely." She too as she began to focus her new life on helping improve the prison conditions of women

found the preoccupations of the majority of middle class and upper class men and women "superficial."

From her new home in Vermont and fifteen years removed from her experience in Cambodia, **Loung Ung** writes, "My rage made me strong and resilient." As a spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World, she travels extensively in the US and overseas. She continues, "I've had the chance to do something that's worth my being alive. It's empowering; it feels right. The more I tell people, the less nightmares haunt me. The more people listen to me, the less I hate."

Carol Gilligan argues that research is beginning to show that what psychologists have taken to be human nature is really an adaptation to a particular human landscape. These three women experienced dissociation from their inner core because the laws of patriarchy require that both men and women hide behind masks. Each of the three women veiled their inner core and appeared through their admission of hatred to take on the patriarchy in a patriarchal manner. However, in the silence, they were drawn even in their hesitation, doubt, and confusion to listen to that core and to nurture it. When they emerged from their ordeals, the veils lifted. The women were transformed in the sense that they no longer could relate to the geography of patriarchy. It seemed a foreign land to them. Each soul was in the process of reclaiming its "Divine majority."

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Signature: Eileen M. Meagher
Organization/Address: University of Tn @ Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN 37402
Printed Name/Position/Title: Professor of English
Telephone: 423-425-4673 Fax: 423-425-2282
E-mail Address: EILEEN-MEAGHER@utc.edu
Date: 03/26/03